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THE STUDY OF RETAIL PRICES IN BOSTON AND VICINITY.

By WALTER F. COOK, S.B.

At the suggestion of Dr. Davis R. Dewey, Associate Professor of Economics, I undertook in the spring of 1890, as a basis for a thesis to be submitted for graduation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, an investigation of the variation of retail prices in Boston and its immediate suburbs.

For this purpose the following localities were chosen: the North End, the West End, East Boston, South Boston, Roxbury, the South End, Dorchester, the Back Bay, Brookline, and the central portion of Boston proper. In each district I endeavored to select those stores whose trade appeared to be typical for that section; and as nearly as possible I compared the prices of the same brand of goods. As far as possible also only such goods were selected as may be considered staples in their respective lines,—that is, not goods of one season only, but those kept in stock by ordinary dealers at all times. Goods which were likely to vary in price from day to day were avoided. The prices of the goods of one line were collected before those of another were begun, excepting where two lines of goods were kept in the same place, as in the case of groceries and provisions. The time occupied in collection was about three weeks in each line. The articles selected for consideration are divided into five classes: I, Groceries; II, Provisions; III, Dry Goods; IV, Drugs; V, Coal. A reference to the accompanying tables will show the names of the particular articles. In collecting the data a personal visit was made to the different dealers. Except where standard brands were priced, the goods were seen if possible. Some difficulty was encountered in getting these prices until the dealers were thoroughly satisfied that the information was not desired in the interest of some rival house, and in most instances the request was granted. In some places complete lists could not be obtained. Of course it is not to be inferred from the figures here presented that prices throughout a district necessarily conform in all cases to those quoted; these are only offered as prices of what may be termed the average establishments of the several districts.

Prices were obtained from eighteen grocery stores, sixteen provision stores, sixteen drug stores, thirteen dry goods stores, and twelve coal dealers. The grocery, provision, and drug stores exhibited the greatest variations, especially the latter; dry goods and coal prices were more uniform. Among the groceries Mocha coffee varied from 32 to 40 cents a pound; sugar showed the least variation of any article, for at fourteen places out of eighteen its cost was seven cents a pound, and at the other four seven and one-half cents. In the grocery and provision business the quality of the goods kept was more dependent upon the class of trade than it was in the three other trades studied. The prices obtained from the druggists showed the most extreme variations. Only two articles of those selected were found with the same price in all of the stores,—pressed herbs per pound, and black licorice per stick. Upon a patent medicine the extremes were 34 and 50 cents for exactly the same article. For a certain prescription the highest price was 50 cents and the lowest 25 cents, a difference of 100 per cent. With ammonia a difference of more than 300 per cent was found.

In the dry-goods trade no one district appears to possess any decided advantage over another in the prices of the articles selected, save in cambric and ticking. In groceries and provisions, however, no such general statement can be made. Coal per ton does not vary in price, but in small quantities the price is largely subject to agreements between the dealer and purchaser. The results of the inquiry are appended in the following tables:—

GROCERIES.		North End.		West End.		E. Boston.		S. Boston.		Roxbury.		Brookline.		Back Bay.		Boston.		
		\$.85	\$.85	.70-.90	\$.90	\$.85	\$.90	\$.85	\$.80	\$.90	\$.85	\$.85	\$.85	\$.85	\$.80	\$....	\$....	\$.85
Flour.....	Bag.	.04	...	.05	.05	.05	.05	.04	.04	.04	...	.05	.04	.04	....	....	....	\$.85
Sugar.....	Lb.	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.07	.05
Rice.....	"	.07-.09	.06	.06-.08	.06-.08	.07-.09	.08	.08	.08-10	.08-10	.07-.09	.07-.09	.09	.10	.09	.09	.09	.06-.08
Tea, Oolong.....	"	.25-.70	.50	.40-.75	.40-.70	.25-.75	.50-75	.50	.30-.60	.70	.25-.75	.35-.70	.50	.50-\$.1	....	.40-1.50	.50-.75	.50-\$.1
Coffee, Mocha.....	"	.35	.35	.38	.35	.40	.38	.40	.35	.40	.32	.38	.36	.38	.38	.37	.37	.35
Beans.....	Qt.	.08	.08	.08-10	.10	.08	.09	.09	.06-10	.12	.06	.09	.10	.12	.10	.10	.10	.10
Molasses.....	Gal.	.45	.50-.60	.50-.60	.40	.35-.70	.40	.50	.45	.60	.55	.45-.60	.60	.60	.60	.60	.45-.60	.40-.60
Starch.....	Lb.	.06	.05	.06-10	.06-10	.06-.08	.08	.04	.08	.07	.05	.06	.08	.10	.10	.09	.06-10	.06-10
Codfish, dry.....	"	.07	.08	.07-.09	....	.10	.08	.10	.10	.08	.07-.09	.10	.10	.10	.10	.....	.08-.09	.06-10
COAL.																		
One-half Bushel, 50 lbs.....	....	.25	.25	....	.20-.25	....	....	.20	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	.20	....
One Ton.....	....	5.75	....	....	5.75	....	5.75	5.75	....	5.75	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....
One-half Ton.....	....	3.00	....	....	3.00	....	3.00	3.00	....	3.00	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....
One-quarter Ton.....	....	1.55	....	....	1.60	....	1.55	1.55	....	1.55	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....
100 Pounds.....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....	....
PROVISIONS.																		
Beef, Sirloin.....	Lbs.	.25	.25	.25	.28	.25	.25	.25	.25	.25	.22	.28	....	....	....	....	.25	.25
" Ramp.....	"	.25	.25	.28	.28	.25	.25	.25	.25	.25	.25	.28	....	.25	.25	....	.25	.23
" Corned, Brisket.....	"	.10	.10	.10	.12-.15	.10	.10	.10	.12	.12	.11	.14	....	.12	.09	....	.09	.10
" Flank.....	"	.05	.06-.08	.05	....	.08	.08	.04	.05	.06	.06	.10	....	.10	.09	....	.06	.04-.05
Soup Stock.....	"	.03	.04-.05	.04-.06	.05	.03	....	.03	.02	.03	....	....	....	.05	....	....	.03	.03
Mutton Chops.....	"	.16	.20	.25	.20	.14	.15	.16	.20	.25	.22	....	....	.25	.25	....	.15	....
" Leg.....	"	.12	.16	.15	.18	.14	.15	.14	.18	.18	.13	.17	....	.20	.18	....	.14	.10
Veal, Leg.....	"	.12	.15	.14	.25	.14	.15	.14	.18	.18	.16	....	....	.25	.25	....	.14	.09-.13
Sausages.....	"	.10	.12	.12	.16	....	....	.12	.10	.12	....	....	....	.12	....	....	.10	.10
Pork Chops.....	"	.10	.12	.12	.12	.10	.10	.10	.09	.12	.11	.12	....	.12	.20	....	.10	.14
Chicken.....	"	.18	.20	.18	.20	.25	.18	.20	.18	.20	....	.33	....	.30	.15	....	.20	.20
Fowl.....	"	.15	.16	.17-.18	.20	.16	.18	.16	.16	.18	....	.20	....	.20	....	....	.14	.10

